**A Comprehensive Program: The Organizational Framework for Effective School Counseling**

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School counseling as we know it today had its origins in the early 1900s with the appointment of teachers to the position of vocational counselor. No organizational structure was evident to organize the work of these early practitioners in the schools other than a list of duties. In the 1930s and 1940s, dissatisfaction with the position approach led to the creation of the services model in which the work of school counseling was organized around six basic services and was placed within the overall structure of pupil personnel services. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the comprehensive program approach to school counseling began to evolve so that today the position and services models have been transformed and incorporated into comprehensive programs that are integral and central to education’s overall mission. As a result, school counseling is becoming a mainstream program, not a marginal and supplemental activity.

What benefits result from having comprehensive school counseling programs in our schools? What have we learned about the processes and problems of developing, implementing and evaluating comprehensive school counseling programs? What is the future for comprehensive school counseling programs?

**Program Benefits**  
There are many benefits to the program approach to school counseling.

**Providing solid benefits:** First and foremost, students and their parents benefit from the activities and services school counselors can provide while working within the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs. Students and their parents benefit because the program concept mandates that school counselors work full time carrying out the program with at least 80 percent of their time being spent in direct service to all students of all ages and circumstances and their parents or guardians. The program concept also mandates that within this time frame, school counselors provide direct intentional interventions to students with specific needs and concerns. Duties not connected to the program (other than those included in fair-share responsibilities) are eliminated. In this context it is important to remember the words direct services and at least 80 percent of their time. Although school counselors do have important coordination, consultation and staff development roles, their primary purpose for being in schools is to spend most of their time providing direct services and activities to students and their parents while working closely with teachers, administrators and other educational personnel.

**Becoming an equal partner:** When school counseling is organized and implemented as a comprehensive program, it places school counselors conceptually and structurally in the center of education. Doing so makes it possible for them to contribute directly and substantially to their local school districts’ and school buildings’ educational missions, goals and school improvement plans. As a result, school counseling becomes an equal and valued partner with the curriculum and instruction work of a school district.

**Providing developmental services:** The comprehensive program concept makes it possible for school counselors to fully engage and put into operation the meaning of the word developmental. The organizational framework of a comprehensive program requires a developmental perspective because there is content for the program to deliver to all students. A comprehensive program provides regular and systematic opportunities for all K-12 students to acquire solid foundation knowledge and skills that facilitate their academic, career and personal/social development. The program also provides regular and systematic opportunities for all students, beginning in middle school, with their parents’ support and encouragement, to plan, monitor and manage their own learning. All students have the opportunity to evaluate their educational, occupational and personal goals and develop personal plans for progress in collaboration with their parents.

**Offering responsive services:** The comprehensive program concept makes it possible for school counselors to fully engage and put into operation the meaning of the word remedial. Ongoing responsive services are available to respond to students’ immediate needs and concerns, which may require counseling; consultation with parents, teachers, or administrators; or referral. These services are available to all students although many students may never require them.

**Identifying results:** The concept of accountability, school counselors being answerable for the work they do, is built directly into the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs in two ways. First, being accountable is not treated as something extra; it is an expected part of school counselors’ work. Second, the framework of the program provides the structure to establish expected student results; it is a results-based program by design. Once expected student results are identified, appropriate methodology is chosen to assess whether or not particular school counseling activities or services are having the desired impact.

**Promoting the profession:** Much of the work of school counselors is invisible to others, some of which must remain so, because of ethical guidelines. However, a great deal of school counselors’ work can and should be visible so the public can be informed and involved. Unfortunately, few school counselors in the past made a habit of describing their programs in written form. Work hard yes, write no. The program approach makes visibility possible because it requires school counseling departments to prepare a written document fully describing their comprehensive school counseling programs. Once programs are described in written form, school counselors can use these basic documents to develop various information tools to advocate for the programs. Writing the comprehensive school counseling program down on paper does not make it so, but it is difficult to make it so if it isn’t written down.

**Writing it down:** Under the position and services models, there was a lack of organizational infrastructure for school counseling at the school district level. School board policies for school counseling were either nonexistent or, if present, were simply lists of duties for school counselors to perform. Supervision and performance-based evaluation forms and procedures for school counselors were based on the forms and procedures used for teachers. The comprehensive program approach to school counseling, however, requires that school district policies be written in program language matching the language used to describe a comprehensive program. Similarly, the program approach requires school counselor job descriptions and the accompanying supervision and evaluation forms and procedures also to be written in the language of the comprehensive school counseling program.

**Working together:** School counselors, working within the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs, do not work independently. The program concept is based on the premise that all school personnel are involved. At the same time, it is understood that school counselors are central to the program, providing direct activities and services to students and their parents or guardians as well as working collaboratively with teachers, administrators, other educational professionals and community members. Collaboration is a major ingredient and strength of comprehensive school counseling programs.

**Lessons Learned**  
Over the past 30 years, we have learned many important lessons concerning the issues and processes involved in developing, implementing and evaluating comprehensive school counseling programs in our schools. We have learned that although comprehensive school counseling programs can be developed building by building and level by level, the development process works best when it is addressed from a district perspective. To have the greatest impact on student growth and development, school counseling activities and services must be organized and sequenced over the full K-12 years. Optional program development requires that all parties involved work together because school counselors, administrators, teachers, boards of education, students and parents all have important roles to play. Given the fragmentation and separation that occurs naturally by building and level in school districts, hard work is needed to bring people together and keep them together over time in order to develop, implement and evaluate a program.

Additionally, optional program development, implementation and evaluation requires all involved parties to develop and use a common language concerning what the program is and what the program is not. Too often, school counselors in different buildings or levels in districts have different perspectives concerning school counseling. The same is true for school administrators and probably school board members as well. Because these differing perspectives have often led to program fragmentation and separation, all involved must use the common language framework of the comprehensive school counseling program to direct their development, implementation and evaluation work.

Another lesson we have learned is that the comprehensive program framework is the foundation for districts’ K-12 school counseling programs. It provides the common language that all parties can use to describe school counseling programs K-12. The common language program framework fits all educational levels – small, large, rural, urban and suburban schools. The framework works in all settings.

**One Size Fits All?**  
Given the premise that the program framework works in all settings, does one size really fit all? The answer is that the overall framework fits all. We have learned, however, that within the common language framework, the actual program a district develops and implements will vary by grade level and, probably to some extent, by buildings at the same grade level based on student needs and district resources and goals. The same is true concerning the time allocations of program staff.

Another important lesson learned deals with change. Developing, implementing and evaluating comprehensive programs result in change, and many fear change. For some the program development process is not a break from the past but simply a continuation of existing values and norms. For them, it can be done with existing knowledge and resources. For others the program development process represents a sharp break from the past and requires substantial new resources and training. Reconciling these two points of view is sometimes difficult, but it must be done so the program development process can move forward.

Time is another important factor to consider in the program development process. It is not possible to take a program model and install it as one would a program on a computer. The program development process is actually similar to remodeling a home. It takes longer than you think it will, it’s messy and even frustrating at times, but when it’s over, the time spent is worth the effort. A tangible, visible and effective program emerges that will meet the needs of your students and their parents as well as the needs of your district and community. Most importantly, we have learned that program development, implementation and evaluation are ongoing tasks, not singular events.

As comprehensive school counseling program development, implementation and evaluation unfold, there is a need to expand and extend our attention to diversity in all of its aspects. These aspects can include age, culture, ethnicity, gender, language, race, sexual orientation, social class and disability to name a few. This requires school counselors to be diversity-sensitive and responsive as they work within the framework of comprehensive school counseling programs.

**Evaluation and Accountability**  
A critical lesson we have learned and continue to learn is the importance of evaluating the work we do so we are accountable. You may have already discovered there is a good deal of work involved in developing and implementing comprehensive school counseling programs. But it is the evaluation phase of the process that often creates work overload and the most anxiety in the minds of school counselors. Thus, the first task in evaluation is for school counselors to rid their minds of the phobia of evaluation, of the persistent fear of evaluation that often leads to a compelling desire to avoid anything to do with evaluation. What is required is the mindset that evaluation is a part of school counselors’ work that is done in schools each and everyday.

Evaluation produces myriad kinds of data that can be used in a variety of ways. Data can be used to demonstrate program effectiveness. Just as important, however, is the use of data to enhance school counselors’ work and the overall comprehensive school counseling programs in which they work. The program enhancement phase of the change process follows evaluation but connects back to the beginning of the program development process by using evaluation data to redesign the program. We have learned that the enhancement process is spiral, not circular, because each time the redesign process unfolds, new and more effective comprehensive school counseling programs emerge.

Finally, an important lesson learned involves counselor education. The process of developing, implementing and evaluating comprehensive school counseling programs must involve counselor educators as well as school counselors. Counselor educators are not innocent bystanders. They have critical roles to play in providing school counselors-in-training with the attitudes, knowledge and skills involved in comprehensive school counseling program development, implementation and evaluation. This means school counselors-in-training need to know the why and how of program planning, designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing.

Of particular importance in counselor education today is the need to provide school counselors-in-training with specific knowledge and skills in evaluation and the use of data. Such training goes well beyond a basic course in statistics. School counselors-in-training need to know how to focus on school district and school building issues and concerns, use existing school data and evaluate school counseling activities and services designed to deal with these issues and concerns. They need to know how to use spreadsheets, organize and develop charts and graphs displaying data and how to use data to advocate for their programs.

**What Does the Future Hold?**School counseling has a rich history that began at the turn of the last century. Many individuals and various economic, social and political events and conditions interacted over the decades to bring us to where we are today. Building on this rich history, I believe school counseling has a bright future, one that holds the promise that all school districts in the United States will have fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs, serving all students and their parents and staffed by school counselors working closely with parents, teachers, administrators and community members.

What will be required to fulfill this expectation, this promise, of all school districts having fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs? It will require active, involved school counselors who use their hearts and hands as well as their minds. School counselors who strive to persevere in spite of numerous difficulties and obstacles. Who are strong advocates for school counseling programs and are willing and able to speak out loudly and clearly to all concerned about the important and valuable roles school counseling programs play in accomplishing the overall mission of education.

Being involved in developing, implementing and evaluating comprehensive school counseling programs may seem overwhelming at first, but the rewards are substantial. Working within the framework of fully implemented K-12 programs, school counselors are able to spend most of their time working directly with students and their parents. Fully implemented programs however, also provide school counselors with time to consult with teachers, administrators and other educational personnel as well as to support other educational programs. Finally, fully implemented programs provide school counselors with time to manage, evaluate and enhance program activities and services.

When school counseling programs are fully implemented in this manner, school counseling becomes a regular program in the school that is integral and central to the mission of education. This is the promise our bright future holds.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Norman C. Gysbers**

Norman C. Gysbers, Ph.D., pioneered the Comprehensive Guidance Program Model, which has become the basis for many school counseling programs and principles, including the ASCA National Model®. He believes educational reform must encompass all aspects of education, including guidance and counseling. Integral to this reform is the idea that guidance and counseling should not be oriented on an individual or a position but should be oriented on a comprehensive program grounded in principles of human growth and development. In this model, school counseling is not a support service but an equal partner with instructional programs in the intellectual and academic development of students.

Gysbers is also a leader in the field of career counseling, redefining career planning not just in terms of jobs, occupation or vocation but in terms of career life development over the lifespan through the integration of the roles, settings and events in a person’s life.

Gysbers developed his ideas through his experience as a public school teacher, a school counselor and a serviceman in the U.S. Army. He graduated from Hope College and received a master’s degree and doctoral degree from the University of Michigan. He is currently a professor with distinction, in the department of educational and counseling psychology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Nevada-Reno and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and has made presentations about comprehensive school counseling programs throughout the world. In addition, he is the author of numerous books and articles on comprehensive school counseling programs, career counseling and other counseling-related topics, including “Developing and Managing Your School Guidance Program” (third edition, 2000, with Patricia Henderson) and “Career Counseling: Process, Issues and Techniques” (1998, with Mary Heppner and Joseph Johnston).

Since 1978, Gysbers has been the editor of the Journal of Career Development. He also has been the editor of the Career Development Quarterly, president of the National Career Development Association, president of the American Counseling Association and vice president of the American Vocational Association.

In 2004, ASCA named him as an inaugural recipient of the Mary Gehrke Lifetime Achievement Award.